DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 254 FL 017 182

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TITLE Zen & the Art of Composition: A Comparison of Teaching Methods.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Japan Association of Language Teachers' International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning (Seirei Gakuen, Hamamatsu, Japan, November 22-24, 1986).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Buddhism; Classroom Techniques; Comparative Analysis; Correlation; *English (Second Language); *Religious Education; *Teaching Methods; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Zen Buddhism

ABSTRACT

A perceived relationship between the teaching methods of traditional Zen Buddhism and those of process-based English composition is explored. It is noted that the four main processes of Zen teaching (meditation, physical work, personal interviews, and group lectures) focus on process, not product, as in process writing. Characteristics that Zen Buddhism instruction and writing instruction are found to have in common include knowing what not to say and when not to say it, and using correction only for those who are ready. It is also suggested that both Zen and writing are practiced not only for the self but for all. Meditation and physical work are compared to prewriting and writing. The writing conference is compared to the Zen conference, requiring preparation and careful listening to oneself. The group lecture, rarely used in Zen or in process-writing, is found in both disciplines to be reserved for occasions requiring the teacher to address a common problem. (MSE)

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ZEN & THE ART OF COMPOSITION:

a Comparison of Teaching Methods

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presented at the JALT International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning
November 1986, Seirei Gakuen, Hamamatsu, JAPAN

Abstract

This paper examines, and attempts to explain, a perceived relationship between the teaching methods of traditional Zen Buddhism and the teaching methods of process-writing English Composition, from the point of view of a participant-researcher who has both practised as a Zen monk and taught university-level composition.

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The teaching of writing has too many experts; what we need are some old beginners. My first Zen Master, Japanese-American Shunryu Suzuki of San Francisco Zen Center, wrote: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few.... When we have no thought of achievement...we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something.... So the most difficult thing is always to keep your beginner's mind. There is no need to have a deep understanding of Zen.... You should not say, 'I know what Zen is,' or 'I have attained enlightenment.' This is also the real secret of the arts: always be a beginner. Be very careful about this point" (1970:22).

I was talking about winning at tennis with a Japanese colleague out on the courts one day, but we could have been talking about writing. "Results aren't very important," I said, "because as soon as you talk about results,

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you're living in the past, and life is lived in the present. It's the game itself, the process, that's so vital and interesting, not the results."

"That's very American, isn't it!" he said.

"Maybe it is," I told him, "but I got the idea from practising Japanese Zen Buddhism for twenty years."

A traditional Buddhist story about an old beginner, and about rules and results, might illuminate the matter: long ago in Sri Lanka, where the rules for male monks are very strict and a woman may never be touched, an old monk and a young monk were walking along a forest path, when they came to a river. At the bank stood a gorgeous young woman in her best sari, obviously unwilling to get it wet in the muddy stream. Without any hesitation, the old monk picked her up, held her closely in his arms, and carried her across the river. On the other side he put her down gently, she thanked him and headed off in one direction, while the two monks set off in another. After two hours of walking in silence, the young monk, who had been stewing and steaming all this time, couldn't stand it any more.

"I...I...I don't understand how you could break our rules!" he spluttered. "You not only touched her, your whole bodies were rubbing against each other!"

"Ah, well," the old monk said, "I put her down two hours ago; you're still carrying her."

In the Western world, rules of logic and dialectic demand that everything be divided into This and That, but in the Eastern world often This <u>is</u> That (in Sanskrit <u>tat tvam asi</u>). The division of everything into at least two parts by the ancient Greeks, while creating a background for the brilliance of Western science, has also led to a dualism which lends itself to a false view of things as being static, unchanging, as though we can hold two opposing parts up for scrutiny and they will stay there, fixed like butterflies on a pin.

In Zen, duality is an illusion, maybe temporarily useful for talking about something (in terms of teaching, the Sanskrit upaya, skillful means, or Coyote Trickster engaged in what poet Gary Snyder calls the Real Work) without forgetting that the illusion rides lightly on the surface of reality; underneath is unity and a oneness which is never static but always in motion, and always was and will be in motion--this unending process of which we are all part and always now.

Since the Zen teacher knows, from experience, that there is only process, that stasis is an illusion, s/he must use process as a teaching method.

Zen teaching method uses four main processes (plus whatever else is around that will do the trick): meditation, physical work, personal interviews, and group lectures, in that order of importance. Zen meditation is called zazen (sitting zen) and is the heart of Zen training because it is experiential, something you do, and must do alone with yourself even if fifty other students are sitting in the meditation hall with you.

Next is physical work, lots of it, but no hurry, nothing to finish, for the work goes on forever. You seek the rhythm of the work; you work the work and the work works you. You are "keeping in shape."

In the personal interview, or conference with the teacher, the student gets a regular and continuing chance to talk on a one-to-one basis with the teacher, a person who has been through the same process with his or her own teacher, and knows most of the frustrations and pitfalls, as well as the occasional joys, of the process. The teacher does much more listening than talking, knowing that students must find out for themselves, that although showing a student once in a while may help, just telling a student is generally a waste of breath. The conference is quite brief, just a few minutes, though when necessary it can go on longer.

Last in importance is the lecture to the group: the teacher may seem to speak rather randomly, to cast around for a theme or a mood, maybe tell funny stories from his or her own student days, or traditional Zen stories that sound like paradoxes and often don't make much sense to the intellect:

Student: "Is there a Hell?"

Teacher: "Umn, yes there is and no there isn't."

Student: "What do you mean, yes there is and no there isn't?"

Teacher: "Well, if you're in Hell, there is, and if you're not in Hell, there isn't."

If the student is ripe, the story makes sense, either at that time, or later in a delayed reaction. On occasion, the teacher may even do a bit of gentle exhortation, if the students seem to have been especially sleepy of late; more often, the teacher just says, "Let's not talk, let's sit," and the lecture turns into yet another meditation session.

Of course, no matter what the teacher says or does to the contrary, the young Zen student still thinks that there is something to attain, some Big Goal, some Product.

In the middle 1960's, writing teachers began to realize that the traditional way of looking at writing as a product, and of teaching writing with the product as a clear goal, was a faulty view resulting in a faulty procedure which more often than not produced poor writing. What is poor writing, anyway? Is this piece, which I found printed on a Japanese plastic beach bag, an example?

"Honey...Smile Punch! Beer with Healthy. Asahi Draft Beer, the best thirst-quencher for you and anyone else; brown liquids with tiny white bubbles penetration into throat and stomach, gorgeous confidence. Ingredients; malt, hop, rice, corn, starch...simultaneously about 4 and 0.5 percent alcohol. NO

dispose of heat. Brewed and nice ALL-Aluminum canned by Asahi Breweries Limited Japan (but worldwide scale company...), You Know It!

How Dare TARA CLUB with all sexy times available to latest image conquest.

Message from the bottom. First Time, drink up all six cans full of Asahi Draft Beer. Next to Last. This bag will be useful for letting in vikini and other swimming suits. plus Think for yourself in any case!"

I think it is pretty good writing: it communicates, it's funny, has rhythm and imagery. Give a student with a mind that creative and loose to many of today's writing teachers and they will be delighted; there has been a significant and growing shift toward the view that writing, like living, is a process without absolute and logical goals, and that to learn to write, students and teachers alike must write regularly and often, working with the whole spectrum of the writing experience from thinking to note-taking to writing to rewriting to revising to editing and back around again in a continuing cycle. Moreover, focusing only on the product, the paper to be handed in for correcting and grading, results in a concentration on error that unintentionally reinforces error as well as loathing and failure-angst.

It seems to me that the process of teaching writing is becoming much like the process of teaching Zen, a marvelous cross-fertilization of Eastern and Western ways. Donald M. Murray writes: "The process of making meaning with written language can not be understood from looking backward from a finished page. Process can not be inferred from product any more than a pig can be inferred from a sausage" (1980:3). Saying the obvious, and saying it well and concretely, is enormously difficult and enormously helpful. It is a display of the skill of a true teacher.

Even more important is the skill of knowing what not to say and when not to say it. "Each year I teach less and less," Murray confesses, "and my

students seem to learn more. I guess what I've learned to do is to stay out of their way and not to interfere with their learning" (1979:14).

Correction is only for those who are ready; like a Zen story, if you're ready, you understand it, and if you're not, you don't. But advanced students are usually self-correcting, anyway, and a teacher probably should not waste much energy on a student who does not care. My friend Zen Master Kobun Chino, in California, once said to me: "When Buddha meets Not-Buddha, he does not speak."

Writing is an ethical act, as Zen teachers believe that meditation is an ethical act. Neither the practise of Zen nor the practise of writing should be done only for the self, for selfish purposes. In one sense it is done for the self, but in another sense it is done for everyone, for all beings; it may be practised alone and in quietude, but its implications eddy out through the worlds like the rings from a rock tossed into a still pool.

In a loose way I would compare meditation and physical work, the most important and intertwined processes in Zen, with thinking (prewriting) and writing. At first comes that outwardly quiet time when connections begin to occur among bits and pieces of previously collected information, when the voice inside the head starts to speak, halt, rearrange, speak again. Writers do, and should, spend a lot of time just "gazing at the wall" like Zen monks.

Writing itself is, in fact, hard physical work, whether with pencil or keyboard: hands cramp, neck-cords tighten, shoulders ache, eyes unfocus. The writer sweats, paces, chills, moves back in for more, looking for a rhythm to emerge.

The writing conference is like the Zen conference, one-on-one, teacher listening carefully to student so that the student can learn to listen carefully to the self. Students need to prepare themselves for the conference, because the teacher of Zen or of writing will ask questions rather than make

detailed comments or criticisms, turning back questions toward the student like the farmer from Maine who, when told the weather's fine, replies, "Is it?"

The group lecture, least important and rarely indulged in both by the Zen teacher and the process-writing teacher, is reserved for those occasions when the teacher really feels some need to talk to the group together, or it becomes evident to the teacher that the group truly needs him or her to address some problem held in common.

Buddhism is called "the middle way," because Siddhartha (the historical Buddha) found that neither starving himself nor pampering himself helped him to come to understand the nature of reality, so he learned to work and meditate calmly, eating when hungry, drinking when thirsty, sleeping when tired. "When you eat, just eat," says the Zen teacher, and the writing teacher can say, "When you write, just write."

When I was a graduate student many years ago, I was fired from a job correcting business letters for a business-English teacher, because I couldn't bring myself to fail those students who wrote simple, clear letters but strayed from the rigid formulae this teacher insisted upon.

Years later, a friend working for the president of a giant cosmetics company in Osaka told me that the boss could not understand why, in translating his business letters from Japanese to English, two pages became half a page. What had happened to the rest of his letter? My friend tried to explain, unsuccessfully, that the polite diffuseness of the Japanese business letter style and the relatively brutal terseness of the American business letter style created big problems in translation and editing.

So there is a middle way in writing, too: unnecessary in a business letter either to chatter to no purpose or to avoid rigorously a few friendly lines; and in student essays, a middle ground exists between a sloppy

formlessness and the rigidity of the error-free five-paragraph piece of dullness that makes students ardently desire to trash teachers and read comics.

What is the Dharma, the Truth, the Way, when it comes to writing? Poet W. S. Merwin says, "Practise, practise, put your hope in that."

Teaching practise is just advanced-learner practise, but the teacher must exercise a fine and unobtrusive and non-interfering yet clear control over the classroom and its activities, setting an atmosphere of self-control, for writing, like Zen, aims at total freedom, but its practise is disciplined. To be effective, that discipline has to be internal, a balancing of self between dopey laziness and paralyzing stress. The Zen teacher never whacks you with the long stick unless you ask for it; you get to find your own way.

As Zen teachers always meditate with their students, so writing teachers should write in class along with students: you cannot teach what you cannot or will not do. Busy writing, the teacher won't be looking over people's shoulders, making them nervous; the students will plainly see that you practise what you preach.

One way of expressing Buddhism's Triple Treasure is as body, mind, and speech (or writing), because at the crosshair of speaking/writing with body and mind, a physical act and a mental act simultaneously combine and become one, producing a communication which is both emotional and intellectual, both immediate and storable.

"Your" students have not taken your writing course to accomplish your set of goals, but to learn to write, and they need plenty of space to grow in order to do this: the teacher provides a big space and a broad way. Growing is a process, not a product. Grammatical structure, figurative language, accurate punctuation; the bones, the flesh, the jewels of writing, given enough space and time for practise, appear, real and dazzling.

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